



## Governor's Blue-Ribbon Panel on Living and Dying with Dignity

**Norman Goldstein MD, Editor**

After a year-and-a-half of monthly meetings, the Governor's Blue-Ribbon Panel on Living and Dying with Dignity completed its report to the Governor on May 11, 1998. The Panel approved unanimously the following six recommendations.

1. That spiritual counseling be made more available to individuals who are afflicted with life-threatening illnesses by integrating those services more fully into the healthcare system.
2. That the public and healthcare professional education programs be designed and implemented to increase awareness of the choices available to the dying.
3. That the content of Advance Directives for Healthcare including living wills be made more specific, their use more widespread and their provisions more binding.
4. That hospice care be made more available and offered more expediently to the dying.
5. That effective pain management and other symptom control programs be required in all licensed healthcare institutions.
6. That involuntary euthanasia should continue to be a crime.

Because we in Hawaii live in a pluralistic society with many religious and cultural perspectives, it is important that no one perspective be allowed to impose its beliefs and mores on another. The Panel was not unanimous in its opinion on two major options to be presented to the Governor and our next Legislature:

- Physician-Assisted Suicide (PAS) - the physician provides the agent with which the patient ends his or her life.
- Physician-Assisted Death (PAD) - the physician actually participates in the administration of a lethal agent with the intent to cause the death of the patient.

With strict controls so that there will be no reasonable fear of a "slippery slope" down which patients may be pushed against their will, Doctor-Assisted Death with Dignity - DADD (my preferred term) would provide legal means for assisted death. As in Switzerland and the Netherlands, many voters who have chosen DADD do not in the end actually use their legal right, but they do have the choice. A ballot referendum in Hawaii would permit residents to cast their vote on this important issue.

The Gallup organization recently did a survey based on telephone interviews with 1,200 adult Americans,<sup>1</sup> and found that we:

- Support making it legal under a wide variety of specific circumstances - 33%
- Support making it legal in a few cases but oppose it in most circumstances - 31%
- Oppose making it legal for any reason - 31%
- Don't know or refused to answer - 3%

George Gallup, Jr. presented survey results:

- **The Clergy:** The survey is a wake-up call for the clergy. Not many see the clergy as capable of providing broad spiritual support.
- **The Family:** Throughout the study, the family emerged as a central source of comfort and support. This suggests a strong need, in turn, to support the family. Hospice care is one important means of supporting the family.
- **Young Adults:** The survey uncovers a strong need among younger people to understand what lies ahead. The level and breadth of the concern young people expressed about death calls for a response from those who care about and work with them.
- **The Medical Profession:** The study suggests that medical education should prepare physicians to engage the human, spiritual dimensions of the dying process as well as its clinical realities; and overall, to understand and integrate the spiritual beliefs that so often guide their patients.

*The New England Journal of Medicine* (the other peer-reviewed medical journal) published a special article on "a national survey of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia in the United States."<sup>2</sup> Questionnaires were mailed to a stratified probability sample of 3,102 physicians in the ten specialties in which doctors are most likely to receive requests from patients for assistance with suicide or euthanasia. The authors received 1,902 replies (61%). They reported that about 6% of the physicians actually complied with their patients' requests at least once. The *New England Journal of Medicine* Survey results follow:

- 39% would write a prescription for a lethal dose of medication if legal
- 11% would write a prescription under current legal constraints
- 18% have received a request for assistance
- 3.3% have written a prescription for a lethal dose of medication
- 24% would give a lethal injection if legal
- 7% would give a lethal injection under current legal constraints
- 11% have received a request for a lethal injection
- 4.7% have given a lethal injection

On March 24, 1998, the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* published the results of a telephone survey done for the newspaper and the NBC News 8 TV station between March 12 - 17, 1998. 419 registered voters statewide were asked the question, "Would you favor or oppose a law which would permit physician-assisted death under carefully controlled circumstances in Hawaii?"

- Favor 281 - 67.1%
- Oppose 82 - 19.6%
- No sure 56 - 13.4%
- Total 419 - 100%

The Hawaii Medical Association president, Leonard Howard, asked for a ballot of physicians in the February 1998 *Hawaii*

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*Medical News.* All that was required was one check mark and a signature.

- [ ] I support legislation preventing physician-assisted suicide
- [ ] I support legislation legalizing physician-assisted suicide

Out of 1,900 ballots sent out, only 36 responded: 21 opposing and 15 in favor. Judging by the comments made to me in hospital halls, at medical meetings, and on the phone, physicians in Hawaii do have opinions on physician-assisted suicide - usually very firmly, but are reluctant to state their personal views for the record.

Thanks to Dr. Ann Catts for bringing the Gallup poll to my attention. Thanks also to the Blue-Ribbon Panel members, our diplomatic and tireless Chairman Hideto Konno, Marilyn Seely and her staff who kept us well-supplied with reams of documents, photocopies and references, and also kept our coffee cups full.

#### References

1. Gallup, G.H. - "Spiritual Beliefs and the Dying Process: a Report in a National Survey," George H. Gallup International Institute, 1997.
2. Meier, D.E. et al - A National Survey of Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia in the United States, *N. Eng. Med.* 1998; 338: 1193-1201.

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## Father's Day Poem

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### Proud Father

I saw them standing there  
It's been so many years—  
Years of change and tears  
Since I had seen them there.

Standing side by side,  
Different postures each—  
Those two I'd tried to teach  
To stand tall side by side.

I'd longed to see them grin  
As even now they did—  
So little change since kids,  
When I loved to see them grin.

Walking just ahead—  
Both in blazers blue,  
Clowning as they used to do—  
Walking or jumping in bed.

I felt a father's pride  
In two such handsome sons—  
Collegiate work all done.  
I felt a father's pride

As I saw them standing there.

*Robert Swaim Flowers MD*



## Letters to the Editor

Aloha Dr Goldstein,

This is to thank you for your excellent and eloquent piece in Saturday's *Star Bulletin*.<sup>1</sup> It has been my observation that back during my nursing career I was expected to do to my patients things that might have gotten me arrested had I done them to another species of animal. Sad indeed that our patients are dying, tragic that they are forced to do so on the rack, shorn of their dignity and personalities.

I am appending a sonnet written by a family member on the occasion of his father's death due to intractable liver cancer—he chose to leave before the full horrors of hepatic illness descended on him—

### Last Rites

"Now is the time," you said, as we three sat  
Around your bed, the supper dishes done,  
Your young, new wife, your sister and your son,  
Just settled down for quiet evening chat.  
"Now is the time," you said, making your great,  
Last choice—ours to abet, yours to command—  
The means beside you just as you had planned,  
Resolved to die still managing your fate.  
Mindful of Socrates, you took the draught,  
The glass in your own hand, "Why so sad?"  
You asked. "Sit close and let us all be glad  
Together in our love." And so we laughed,  
or tried to, holding hands until you slept.  
Then we went to separate rooms and wept.

*Name withheld at request of author, a registered nurse.*

#### References

1. Goldstein, N, Letting Go with Dignity Can be Our Finest Hour. *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 1998 (Feb 14), B2.

**American Heart Association**  
Marks 50 Years of Progress



<b>1950s</b>	AHA links smoking to heart disease
<b>1960s</b>	AHA-funded scientists develop pacemaker, valve replacement surgery
<b>1970s</b>	Educational campaign emphasizes heart attack warning signs
<b>1980s</b>	Washington office opened to be nation's advocate on heart and stroke health issues
<b>1990s</b>	AHA's long-term investment in research surpasses \$1 billion



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